World Chronicle

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PRESIDENT OF 54th GENERAL ASSEMBLY

The General Assembly of the United Nations opened its fifty-fourth session on 14 September 1999 at the United Nations Headquarters in New York. The General Assembly brings together the delegations from all Member States, many of them led by Heads of Government or Foreign Ministers, for an examination of international issues. In this edition of **World Chronicle**, Dr. Theo-Ben Gurirab, President of the General Assembly, discusses some of the topics being debated by the 188-nation World Body.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues.

Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

The General Assembly, set up in 1945 under the United Nations Charter, is the Organization's main deliberative organ and provides a forum for multilateral discussion of international issues. The Assembly comprises all Members of the United Nations and meets in regular session each year from September to December, and thereafter as required. From disarmament to women's rights, dozens of important topics are debated during the Assembly. How relevant is the work of the UN General Assembly today?

Our guest is the President of the current General Assembly. He is Theo-Ben Gurirab. Dr. Gurirab is also a Minister of Foreign Affairs of Namibia. Joining me to talk with Dr. Gurirab are Thalif Deen of *Inter Press Service* and Ian Williams of *The Nation*.

Dr. Gurirab, welcome to **World Chronicle**.

GURIRAB: Thank you.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. President, fortuitously, your presidency straddles two centuries and two millennia. It's customary for the President of the General Assembly to identify a theme for the session over which he or she presides – yes, we have had women, of course – he or she presides. What would you say is likely to be the theme that people might remember from your momentous presidency?

GURIRAB: I have chosen the 'pride of world's children' as the theme of my session. We say that we are right in saying so that children are the future. They are expected to inherit the legacies, the heritage and good things that we, the adults, are doing and intend to pass on to the next generations. At the present time, however, children are victims all over the world. In war situations, in pornography, in organized crime and there is a new phenomenon now, that of recruiting children as soldiers of choice in national wars, in regional conflicts, in tribal and religious conflicts and I felt that I should add the status of my office and my own energies to so many others throughout the world who are fighting in so many different ways to save children, for their own sake, for the sake of humanity and to make the future a better place.

LITTLEJOHNS: The recruitment of children for armed conflict seems to be a particular problem in Africa although of course it's not confined to Africa. Do you feel that as

an African President of the General Assembly, there's something that you might be able to do to counter this terrible occurrence?

GURIRAB: It's a global conflict but it is because there are more conflicts and military coups currently in Africa, peculiarly an African problem. Before I assumed the presidency of the General Assembly, I presided over the open meeting of the Security Council during the month of August when Namibia held the presidential council and at the end of that meeting, which saw participation of a large number of countries beyond the members of the Security Council, other members of the UN, at the end of that sitting, the Council adopted for the first time in its history a resolution dealing with children and armed conflicts and it has therefore set not only the highest standards by which we would judge all countries and you are correct, as Namibia's foreign minister and as African President of the Assembly, I will make it a point that the OAU gets that message ...

LITTLEJOHNS: Organization of African Unity.

GURIRAB: Organization of African Unity .... gets that message and that the sub-regional groups, the Southern African Development Community to which Namibia belongs, the West African States, North African States, Central African states, East African Statehood, for their part, do everything possible in their respective regions to ensure that we allow children to grow, that we allow children to learn and play and that we treat them as indeed the embodiment of best that humanity has to offer.

LITTLEJOHNS: Dr. Gurirab, do you feel that that resolution has yet made any impact on the problem — the Security Council Resolution?

GURIRAB: In the nature of the UN, you continue reminding Member States, in this case not only the Member States of the Security Council but also the rest of the UN Member States, and I intend before my session rises, 2000, that the General Assembly itself would adopt an appropriate resolution in the same field.

DEEN: Speaking of the OAU, the Organization of African Unity, at the summit meeting in April in Algiers, one of the decisions taken – it was a unanimous decision – was that no military leader should be allowed to enter or participate in the summit – in the next summit – and Secretary-General Kofi Annan, a couple of weeks ago or months ago, said he was hoping that this example will be followed by the General Assembly. Do you think that it will be a reality as far as the General Assembly is concerned?

GURIRAB: Well it is an important decision and the Africans themselves must lead the way. It was a historic decision. The subject has been talked about during the previous

summits of the African leaders. But this is the first time that they actually decided to pass this resolution in which they – of course in the first instance, say that there should be no more military coups. We must demonstrate our commitment to democratization, respect for human rights and to democratic elections and should anybody, in spite of that decision, continue with the military coup, that such a leader would not be allowed to attend OAU meetings , that instead there will be a demand to organize elections and to allow the people to decide whether they would accept that leader or would elect somebody else. And that is a direct and strong message sent across the Continent. What the General Assembly can do and should do is to welcome that and to urge the African countries to abide by their own decision.

DEEN: No one has raised this issue?

GURIRAB: Not yet, not yet, but we would have an opportunity to discuss Africa at an appropriate time and I expect that this issue would come up.

WILLIAMS: Dr. Gurirab, you have almost a uniquely broad experience in the United Nations. You were here in the '60s and '70s as the Representative of the Southwest African People's Organization when Namibia, who's struggling for independence against South Africa with UN support at the time and now, you've been sitting both in the Security Council and as President of the General Assembly. We get the impression that in the '70s and earlier the General Assembly was a much more important body, in comparison with the Security Council, than it is now. Is this your feeling? Has the General Assembly shrink in importance because the Security Council has usurped its role?

GURIRAB: As the Moderator stated rightly at the beginning, the General Assembly is **the** place where all the United Nations Member States are represented on equal footing. Big nations, small nations, rich nations, poor nations – its importance can never be diminished. The founders of the United Nations and the drafters of the Charter were quite correct. They were driven by vision and presence of wisdom and judgment in having provided for a place where all nations will be represented and that their pains and aspirations and wisdom would be shared by all. It is in the nature of the work of the Security Council, in being the principal organ of the UN Charter, maintenance of international peace and security and therefore war is more exciting than human rights. War destroys. The armies draw attention in the field. So it is not that the agenda of the General Assembly is less important now than before if anything during my presidency. We have these three additional states – small island states from the very far east, from the pacific, and the agenda that we adopted

has 172 items that include all the main concerns of the big countries and small countries. So it is not that the Security Council has become more important than the General Assembly. It's the difference in the focus of the two.

WILLIAMS: At one point, for example, just after the Cold War, the Security Council sat down and went through its agenda and they deliberately removed all sorts of items that have been hanging around the agenda for fifty years of which technically remains ceased. They cleared the decks. You said there are 172 resolutions and looking at some of them, they look as though they are sort of past their debates by day in the sense that they are outmoded. The issues on which they were passed, are well past. Do you think that it would be a good idea to clean up the agenda so that you could concentrate on making more noise about some very serious issues rather than be dissipated on obsessions?

GURIRAB: You have succeeded in reading my mind and then correctly so, I must say. Because I have been around here for quite a longer time, I appreciate the point you are making and it is my intention to sit down with the Chairman of the regional groups, with the Vice- Presidents -- twenty-one in all that I have – and with the general committee, with the Secretary-General and the other heads of the principal organs, for us to review the agenda of the General Assembly and to dispose of those issues that could either be discussed in other fora of the UN or that certainly are no longer relevant. As I am going through the agenda, I realize that there are issues in the agenda that were there before I came to the UN that still remain in the agenda. But there are those that have been disposed of successfully. Independence of Namibia is one of them. There are a number of issues that were on the agenda of the General Assembly that have been successfully resolved.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is **World Chronicle**. Our guest is Theo-Ben Gurirab, President of the current UN General Assembly.

Mr. President, there has been talk for a long time about reforming and expanding the UN Security Council of which Namibia is currently a member. Do you think there's any talk -- but not much action – do you think there's any prospect that this could happen soon? That there could be new permanent members – Japan, Germany, for example, possibly South Africa, possibly Namibia – what do you think is the prospects?

GURIRAB: Prospects continue to be promising. Timing is problematic. It is problematic because whatever reform is going to be undertaken and succeed in the Security Council must enjoy the concurrence, as it stands presently, of the five permanent members. There are a number of things in the reform schedule that do not presently enjoy the

concurrence of the five permanent members. The veto, for example. All of them agreed that it should stay and even when they concede to the enlargement of the permanent membership of the Security Council, they do not agree that the new permanent members should also exercise veto. They should keep the veto but the new ones would not have it. So that's the problem and quite a number of countries feel that -- including Namibia, I must say -- that veto is undemocratic, it's outmoded, it's a relic of the Cold War and it stands in the way of transparency and accountability of the decision making of the Security Council. There are other areas. There seems to be a broad consensus on increasing the number of the non-permanent members but again the exact numbers have not been agreed. The principle has been accepted. Whether there would be additional twenty or less or more, that has not been agreed. The other question or other area is one that strikes me as strange. During my days here as representative of SWAPO -- Southwest Africa People's Organization, now the ruling party of Namibia -- Security Council meetings were routinely open and the other UN members, not members of the Security Council, at any time had an opportunity to participate. We even had times when non-UN members, some experts that could add information upon review to the deliberations of the Council were allowed to participate. Liberation movement -- I participated in the deliberations of the Security Council before Namibia's independence even ahead of the General Assembly granting permanent observer status to SWAPO and that showed a sense that Security Council was sensitive to the views across the Organization.

LITTLEJOHNS: So why do you think that's changed?

GURIRAB: Strangely, at the end of the Cold War, the death of ideology have created new contradictions in the international system. Some are economic, some have to do with security questions and some have to do, I suppose, with new realignments and it's the sad state of affairs. I would continue to advocate that the Security Council should allow itself to be reflective of the views of all Member States.

LITTLEJOHNS: But the situation -- there's also a reason where the five permanent members are meeting constantly in private to the exclusion of the other ten members of the Council, including Namibia.

GURIRAB: That's a new development within a puzzle inside an enigma and I hear complaints. The current President of Security Council, as is the tradition, invited me for lunch along with the chairpersons of the regional groups the other day and was sharing with us the agenda for the month of the Council and we raised this consensus. It was bad enough that the meetings of the Security Council are now routinely closed but that within that secret,

more smaller meetings of permanent members and handpicked others ...

LITTLEJOHNS: I understand the current president is from Sardinia – he is excluded also.

GURIRAB: Yes, even that is certainly most unfortunate.

DEEN: The General Assembly of which you are president is perhaps the only UN organ which is representative of all 188 Member States. In that sense, it really speaks for the International Community. But whenever decisions are taken by the Security Council, like their decision to attack Iraq or to go into Kosovo, there are delegates – there are American delegates, for example -- who go before the country and say this decision has been approved by the International Community when it is only by the Security Council. Do you think this characterization is correct?

GURIRAB: Well, I'm sure you would have an opportunity to talk to the president of Security Council -- I must -- I'm a believer in the United Nations. Actually in my acceptance speech I said that I'm a graduate of the United Nations. I, as a person apart from my country's association with the UN, am very much involved in the activities of the UN. I have a personal commitment to its ideals and the goals set out in the Charter and I believe that the effectiveness, the efficacy of the UN depends upon the degree to which, big and small Member States, rich and poor, are able to sit down and discuss issues and not create a situation of a chosen group of countries, even if they are permanent members of the Security Council. Increasingly, I hear voices that perhaps the whole concept of permanent membership – maybe this is one area where the founders did not realize the consequences of what they were doing -- all the members of the other principal organs are elected. The Secretary-General is elected by the General Assembly. The Judges of the International Court are elected by the General Assembly, so are the members of ECOSOC, and so on, it goes. And the non-permanent members, ten of them, of the Security Council are elected democratically, except for the five. One western diplomat said the other day, where else we say P-5 is a PH.

WILLIAMS: H5 also stands for hydrogen 5. These are the five that have hydrogen bombs and although in principle it's wrong, in practical terms, it would be very difficult to enforce a UN decision against a state with nuclear weapons, wouldn't it?

GURIRAB: Well, what are the nuclear weapons for? Nuclear weapons, so they justify, are there for peace. And if that is what they are there for, this is indivisible and therefore you would want the five permanent members with hydrogen bombs to have the

wisdom and open minds to share the cause of peace with the rest of us because we would also be beneficiaries of world peace and security.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Gurirab, do you think there's any way that the impact of the General Assembly could be increased? Just the other day when it seems that the United States could lose its vote in the General Assembly, *New York Times* reported the vote is symbolic because the argument being that the General Assembly, unlike the Security Council, cannot require Member States to do anything that they don't want to do. Is there any way you could change that to make the influence, the power of the General Assembly greater?

GURIRAB: I do believe that the decision makers in Washington, whether the White House or the State Department, or elsewhere, feel that their vote in the GA is symbolic. That is why they have always managed at the eleventh hour to find enough money to pay to qualify, that they are not kicked out, which is automatic, if the country's assessed contribution equal to or exceed two years payment, then the Charter says, that country loses its vote and the politicians suddenly, if not journalists in this country, realized that it would be a major blunder for the US to be seen, not because it does not have money, but to violate the Charter in such a way. So I think that they realized that they have moral duty and responsibility to pay up their arrears and to pay their contributions on time, in full, without conditions.

WILLIAMS: From the other 1200 million dollars that still has not arrived.

GURIRAB: Yes. We must continue to appeal to the legislators because they are the ones who have to live up to the responsibility of the US both now as the only super power in the world – it's a nuclear power – and the one that has greater responsibility, therefore. I am struck by the level of ignorance, not only of the general public in this country, about the importance of the UN. And when lawmakers, who should know better, talk in a manner about the UN that says that we don't care about that Organization, it's very sad indeed.

WILLIAMS: That's interesting that some of the members who now oppose paying the UN originally did so on the grounds that they supported South Africa and the UN was supporting what they call "terrorist movements" like yours.

GURIRAB: Yes.

WILLIAMS: Do you think this is really about money or is it a political agenda?

GURIRAB: It's both.

LITTLEJOHNS: Dr. Gurirab, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle**.

Our guest has been Theo-Ben Gurirab, President of the current UN General Assembly. He was interviewed by Thalif Deen of *InterPress Service* and Ian Williams of *The Nation*.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

ANNOUNCER: Transcripts of the programme may be obtained free of charge by sending a stamped, self-addressed envelope to **World Chronicle**, United Nations, Room S-827L, New York, N.Y., 10017.

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